

NEWS RELEASE

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STATE CRIME LAB SCIENTIST AND BCI AGENT RECEIVED COMMENDATIONS FROM US ATTORNEY'S OFFICE

BISMARCK, ND – A BCI drug agent and a forensic scientist with the Attorney General's Crime Laboratory have been honored by the US Attorney's office for their roles in the investigation and breakup of a multi-state drug distribution ring involving synthetic drugs and the successful prosecution of those involved.

United States Attorney Tim Purdon presented forensic scientist Charlene Keller and Special Agent Steve Gilpin with the commendations at a public ceremony held today at the Attorney General's office in Bismarck.

The multi-jurisdictional drug investigation for which Keller and Gilpin received federal recognition began in June, 2012, after two teenagers died and three others were hospitalized as a result of using unknown drugs, later identified as synthetic hallucinogens. At the time, these synthetic substances were so new they had never been identified in North Dakota and were not controlled substances under state or federal law. Investigators quickly identified and arrested Andrew Spofford of Grand Forks, who had supplied the deadly drugs to the teens, and then followed the drug trafficking organization back to its source, eventually arresting and charging fifteen individuals in five states with various drug offenses and money laundering.

Special Agent Gilpin is part of the Grand Forks Narcotics Task Force and was assigned to the investigation. He said, "The drug investigation was a team effort and included the entire Grand Forks Narcotics Task Force, the Grand Forks Police Department, Grand Forks County Sheriff's office, as well as the federal agencies. The recognition is greatly appreciated, but the credit really goes to everyone involved."

During the investigation, Keller analyzed 105 drug samples and identified 30 different compounds of which only 12 were identified as controlled substances. This case resulted in the identification of new synthetic drug analogues not previously catalogued by the forensic community. Keller said "Being able to collaborate with other state, federal and international forensic labs provided additional information so I could identify the latest emerging compounds in this case."

To date, thirteen individuals have pled guilty or have been convicted, and have received sentences ranging from 20 years to probation, including Andrew Spofford, who was convicted of conspiracy to distribute controlled substance analogues resulting in death and sentenced to more than 17 years in prison. Charles Carlton, the Texas man who was Spofford's supplier, also pled guilty and will be sentenced later this year.

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“Operation Stolen Youth is an example of the unparalleled cooperation between federal, state, and local law enforcement in North Dakota. In this case, all levels of law enforcement quickly came together to protect the public and to investigate a very complicated crime, said Purdon. “We worked together to deliver some measure of justice to the victims and their families through the prosecution of the drug traffickers involved. This investigation would not have been a success without the contributions of Special Agent Gilpin and forensic scientist Keller, and the U.S. Attorney’s Office was pleased to recognize their outstanding work today,” he continued.

Attorney General Stenehjem said, “The commendations are well-deserved. Ms. Keller and Special Agent Gilpin each played a pivotal role in bringing down an organized drug ring and preventing future deaths. I am very proud of them both.”

Special Agent Gilpin has been employed with the Bureau of Criminal Investigation division since January 2002. Ms. Keller has been employed with the Crime Laboratory division of the Attorney General’s office since May 2006. In 2011, she received the agency’s Meritorious Service Award for excellence in public service.

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